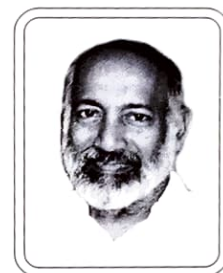


The “Thirty-Family” Years of *Health Action*



Rev Fr M J Edwin

We fly west; we fly east; we fly north; we fly south; our destination is always the same: your heart! So ran the ad of an airline.

Something similar used to be said about my days of editing *Health Action*. Especially about the editorials. “Whatever he writes,” Fr. James Culas, the then Director of Catholic Health Association of India (CHAI), which was behind the monthly magazine for health activism, used to jovially observe, “even if it is the issue on exclusive breast-feeding he would end up with the call for thirty family units.”

That explained the thrust of the magazine and the organization behind, CHAI had as its motto: Health for many more. It was a call to strive unceasingly for the health of people until the last man or woman is healthy. And health, following the WHO definition, was taken as “not merely the absence of disease but a state of physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being which is a fundamental human right.”

How do you ensure that such total-well-being or integral health becomes a reality for not just a few but for “many more”, for everybody? Through the member institutions of CHAI we could just reach only a microscopic few. And that, given our financial compulsions, may not always be in preferential option for the poor.

Hence ever since the days of Fr John Vattamattom SVD, who preceded Fr James Culas as the Director, the call was to go beyond our institutions and promote a movement of claiming health as the right of people. Accordingly, the very name of CHAI was changed from Catholic Hospital Association of India to Catholic Health Association of India.

Health Action was to represent this activism, this struggle for health. Struggle not just for medicines, not just for curative measures, not merely stopping with even preventive measures, but ensuring also promotive health, ensuring everything that goes to promote physical, mental, social and spiritual health. Promotive

health thus included ensuring good water, adequate nutrition, good air to breathe, ensuring that people felt respected, that human rights were not tampered with, that people had good relationships, that they enjoyed being equals and participants in everything that affected them. A tall order. An immense task.

Who could help to achieve that? Our answer: people themselves. Nobody could be more interested in people’s health than people themselves. If only they had power they would see to it that their total well-being is ensured. Thus power became a crucial component in ensuring people’s health.

And what is power? We gave our own working definition: to have power is to have an effective say. And to have any say what do you require? You need a forum to talk.

But people don’t have forums where they could talk effectively on matters that affect their total wellbeing. And that is the basic problem when it comes to empowerment.

All that people have are the once-in-five-year elections where the constituencies are so big-sized forums that the small voices of the small people get drowned. It all then ends up as the game of the big and the moneyed.

“I would very much wish that *Health Action* has a website which makes available in archives the very many pioneering write-ups that appeared over the years as many of them continue to have a healthy relevance even today whether in terms of the various aspects of integral health or just in terms of the overriding concern, the empowerment of people.”

Health Action that was and that should be...

And people in general become powerless and their well-being takes a back seat.

The solution offered by *Health Action* to the problem of the helplessness of the people was to provide people with forums where their voice will not get drowned due to the bigness of the forums. Forums that are small enough that even the last and the least can be confident to air their views and be listened to.

How small then these forums should be? We were guided in this by the concept of "face-to-face communities" as advocated by Mahatma Gandhi. Communities where people could sit in one circle, with none sitting behind anybody else in the second round. In such communities, everybody has, a face, a name, a voice, and ability to influence the decisions. And nobody remains a non-person.

Health Action accordingly proposed that the people at the base be organized as neighbourhood health communities (NHCs) of about thirty families each. Each NHC is to attend to the needs of the families in the neighbourhood.

Each of these health communities could have a health minister and a minister each for everything that directly or indirectly related to health, to total well-being, curatively, preventively or promotively. These NHCs are to be federated, again as face-to-face communities, at the various levels like that of a ward, panchayat, block, district, the State etc.

Health Action published a series of articles explaining this bottom-up approach for health action. One that became a hit got translated into various languages and enacted was a chat-session entitled, "Panchayats won't do". It argued that the gram sabhas too would end up as the game of the bigwigs at panchayat level, as the forums would be too big to inspire confidence and active participation of the small people who are poor and voiceless.

Another chat-session that became even more popular and acted out widely was entitled, "A participating people". Here the contention was that a non-participatory society leads to a sick society. As a solution *Health Action* offered the dream of a global multi-tier federation of neighbourhood parliaments of about thirty families each.

It was the dream of a radically different type of democracy. A kind of a direct democracy that is deeper and more dynamic. A kind of democracy where people will have ongoing control on decisions, policies and processes that affects them. People could even call back any time the representatives they elected, if they found

The solution offered by *Health Action* to the problem of the helplessness of the people was to provide people with forums where their voice will not get drowned due to the bigness of the forums.

them not measuring up. Since the forums at every level of the federation too are supposed to be small-sized face-to-face communities, recalling representatives from one level of the federation to the level immediately below is easy. If at every level the level-immediately-below holds the sway, the rein of power will ultimately be in the hands of the people at the base, in the hands of the poor.

Thus *Health Action's* slogan: "People's health in people's hands." *Health Action* took special interest in looking for and projecting any initiative that could help empower the people and put health, total well-being into people's hands.

So it featured the neighbourhood groups of Alappuzha, the neighbourhood sabhas of Malappuram, Basic Health Communities of Kanyakumari, the neighbourhood-based involvement of Jhanmabhoomi of Andhra Pradesh, the people's planning movement of Kerala, Jamkhed movement of Aroles, the Raigarh-Ambikapur health insurance programme etc.

Health Action has also been a big pioneer this way in promoting alternative therapies. *Health Action* happened to be the first to introduce the now-popular aloe vera-and-honey treatment for cancer. But we have come a long way. *Health Action* can also take pride for gradually contributing its mite to a situation where no paper is considered respectable today if it doesn't contain articles on herbal and similar alternatives.

I would very much wish that *Health Action* has a website which makes available in archives the very many pioneering write-ups that appeared over the years as many of them continue to have a healthy relevance even today whether in terms of the various aspects of integral health or just in terms of the overriding concern: the empowerment of people.

May *Health Action* continue to push, both in season and out of season, the same "thirty-family" idea that, with all the forces working towards it, we could ensure the sooner that people's health is in people's hands. ■

(Former Editor, *Health Action*)